
The Art of Fiona Macleod

Author(s): Lawrence Gilman

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THE ART OF FIONA MACLEOD.

FOR those of us who are more concerned with the essential substance of literature than with its phenomena of time and circumstance, however interesting and significant, it has been a cause of regret that the remarkable body of writing which exists in print over the signature of "Fiona Macleod" has been, so far as its quality is concerned, submerged in the excited *mêlée* of gossip, speculation, and bewildered curiosity which followed upon the death of William Sharp. One need not deny the authentic interest that such a revelation would naturally arouse in the mind of the sincere historian and psychologist of letters; but that it should obscure the extraordinary character and the singular appeal of an artistic achievement which is open to the observation of all, is not unrepresentative, perhaps, of a time which is more immediately engrossed with the externalities than with the actual matter of literature.

One has heard and spoken overmuch, it may be, of the "Celtic revival" and of the "neo-Celtic school," so that too great stress has seemed to be laid upon the merely parochial implications of a phenomenon the chief importance of which, after all, resides in its purely literary aspects. I shall not, therefore, attempt, in this brief appreciation, to consider the work of Fiona Macleod in its relation to the "movement" to which it has been popularly imputed; nor shall I venture upon any discussion of its connection with the literary and spiritual history of Mr. Sharp. It has been presented to the student of contemporary letters as an independent product, and as such one is justified in regarding it; one may comfortably leave the matter of its circumstantial origin to those "polite detectives of literature" for whom such mysteries transcend any other possible consideration.

The "Fiona" literature, put forth during the last decade, ranges easily through the domain of pure fantasy, of fable and allegory, of speculation, of æsthetic discussion, of symbolized fiction, and of verse. The voice has spoken many tongues, but always the accent of the mystic has persisted, has persisted and increased in poignancy and aloofness; so that in her later work it is frankly, and without the palliation of pictorial or symbolical setting, the speech and vision of the dreaming mind that is offered us. One will miss the essential note of this writing if one fails to see in it, as its prime possession, the confessions and aspirations

of a spirit swayed, beyond any other impulse, by a passionate consciousness and a special revelation of all beauty. Beyond any other writer whom one may allege for the comparison, this writer has chosen to saturate her work in beauty. The sense of it is, for her, a perpetual touchstone—a touchstone for the apperception of sheer natural presences, of dream and vision and intimation, of that miraculous and supra-sensuous world in which the spirit of the essential mystic has its intensest life. One may read her own avowal in that haunting preface which introduces her version of the tale of Deirdrê and the Sons of Usna:

“I know you will find a compelling beauty in these old tales of the Gael, a beauty of thought against which to lay your thought, a beauty . . . of desire against which to lay your desire. For they are more than tales of beauty, than tales of wonder. Shall the day come when the tale of Deirdrê shall be no more told? . . . If so, it is not merely beautiful children of legend we shall lose, not the lovely raiment, but the very beauty and love themselves . . . the old wandering ecstasy, the lost upliftedness.”

It is doubtless easier to make than to establish so deliberate a claim for any writer as I have made here, and I shall not attempt to establish it. To achieve a deep and continuous beauty in any art would seem to insure a fairly certain measure of recognition,—a recognition which the writing of Fiona Macleod assuredly has not compelled. For the admittedly small body who do know and esteem it, that is not a matter for inconsolable regret; perhaps they await the coming of that “Spirit of Delight” which, wrote Alice Meynell, “flits upon an orbit elliptically or parabolically or hyperbolically curved, keeping no man knows what trysts with time.”

One must not neglect to note the authentic presence in this beauty of what most of us have agreed to denote, however reluctantly, as the quality of Celtic “magic”; for since that important and memorable occasion when Matthew Arnold used it, so deftly and so luminously, to signalize the peculiar and excelling quality of the Celtic genius, we, a quarter of a century later, have found no equivalent: one must still evoke it if one would apply to the Celtic genius, to Celtic beauty, the inevitable epithet. One finds this quality in the

“ . . . already
The cloudy waters and the glimmering winds
Have covered them ”

of Mr. Yeats, no less than in the

“. . . fairer were her hands and her fingers than the blossoms of the wood-anemone amidst the spray of the meadow fountains. . . .”

adduced from the Welsh by Arnold; and it is movingly and persistently present, as I have said, in the writing of Fiona Macleod, where it is touched with the profound and poignant nostalgia, the wistful ecstasy, of the “Eternal Dreamer.” As she herself has said of a certain group of tales called by her “Wind and Wave,” she has named them so “because through each goes the wind of the Gaelic spirit, which everywhere desires infinitude, but in the penury of things as they are turns upon itself, to the dim enchantment of dreams.” One may feel it in her

“Dim face of Beauty haunting all the world. . . .”;

supremely, perhaps, in that heart-shaking apostrophe of the desolated Conobar to the image of Deirdr  dead, in her brief and piercing drama, “The House of Usna”:

“Heart of my heart, Deirdr ! Love of my love, desire of all desire—can no voice rise to those lips, red as rowans, in that silent place? . . . She sleeps, she sleeps, she is not dead! I will go to the grian n, and will cry *Heart o’ Beauty, awake! It is I, Conobar the King!* She will hear, and she will put white hands through her hair, like white doves going into the shadow of a wood; and I will see her eyes like stars, and her face pale and wonderful as dawn, and her lips like twilight water; and she will sigh, and my heart will be as wind fainting in hot grass, and I will laugh because that I am made king of the world and as the old gods, but greater than they, greater than they, greater than they!”

One would perform an ill service to the memory of such a writer were one to imply that her concern with beauty is directed solely toward mere surface loveliness. She has played, from the first, “upon the silent flutes, upon the nerves wherein the soul sits enmeshed.” Always she has made her command over beauty serve the needs of an exquisite spiritual consciousness. She has sensed the profound and importunate reality of the deeper Beauty. She says revealingly, writing of “The Wind, Silence, and Love”:

“Meanwhile, they are near and intimate. . . . We cannot forget wholly, nor cease to dream, nor be left unhoping, nor be without rest, nor go darkly without torches and songs, if these accompany us; or we them, for they go one way.”

LAWRENCE GILMAN.